

In the back of her mind, she heard a soft whirring sound spring to life. Its presence was not in itself obtrusive, but as it continued on unabated minute after minute, it became more noticeable over the general background of mental traffic. Carol forced herself to concentrate on the source of this unaccustomed presence. Summoning the mental "searchlights" which her teachers had gradually helped her to develop over the years, she began to explore the various facets of her consciousness. Unhurriedly, she began her search at the outer edges of her mind. She gently probed the valleys and crevices which constituted her peripheral control centers. As well-practiced responses sprung up before her searchlights, she could sense that it was not there that she would find that which she was seeking. Consequently, she passed on to a slightly less frequently accessed area, the disequilibrated system analyzer. Pushing through the fringed entranceway, her senses spread out to encompass the entire area. The occasional neural beam whizzed by, setting up routine reactions in the cerebral cortex. Generally, though, the area was quiet, the small cluster of supervisory cells emitting only the level of energy associated with states of neutral activity. Satisfied, Carol withdrew and briefly made an inventory of the progress of her mental search. According to the pattern which had been indelibly placed in her memory, she was following the search sequence exactly. Only a few key areas remained to be explored.

Switching her searchlights to the highest setting, she turned and looped her way slowly down into her reflex and instinct circuits. These areas were more difficult to navigate, as the process of evolution which had shaped them had left behind many uneven surfaces, as well as dark nooks and crannies. The shadow of her ancestors formed almost a tangible presence there. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, however, and with some relief she changed direction and made her way to the information-processing and reasoning centers. The speed of her search began to increase appreciably there. The large, cavernous rooms provided no gloomy spaces which her searchlights could not penetrate. Her years of intense mental training were evident in the well-oiled machinery which lay before her. Travelling smoothly and without obstruction, routine messages were being rapidly processed while glistening banks of gray matter on all sides hummed with the sound of their internal activity. Even though she felt satisfaction with the efficiency of operations in this area, this was soon replaced by a feeling of foreboding. Only one area was left to explore; the area which was the real target of her search.

With uncharacteristic hesitation, she moved her searchlights towards a small, highly-guarded space deep within the caverns of her mind. At the threshold, she paused briefly, and then forced herself to enter. Immediately, her consciousness was perfused with bright light as the knowledge of the new presence housed within her spread out like shock waves through still water. Carol snapped her eyes open. The day had

arrived.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light of her recovery room, the shapes around her began to become more focussed. The room was occupied by the usual paraphernalia - low tables, a few chairs for visitors, and a television at the foot of her bed. For perhaps fifteen minutes the room was very quiet as Carol's mind slowly recovered from that first burst of realization. Like a person who has looked directly at the brilliance of the sun, her mind had become temporarily bleached. But slowly, her mind began to return to normal. As the warm pulses associated with mental energy began to flow, Carol suddenly heard the soft, whirring background sounds. She had been waiting with anticipation for them, like a hushed audience before the drop of the baton. She could hear the wheels move ever so slowly across the floor as they traced minute pathways across the linoleum. Possessing neither purpose nor direction, they were akin to the erratic gestures of a newborn child in an unexplored environment.

Carol forced herself to turn her head and stare at the machine which roamed aimlessly beside her bed. As she did so, the first thing that struck her was the smooth perfection of its construction. It stood about three feet high, consisting of a set of steel alloy wheels attached by short legs to a cylindrical metal body. The entire surface was smooth, without a single blemish to mar its perfection. The high sheen of the metal reflected all of the objects around it, and Carol involuntarily grimaced as she found herself staring into the reflection of her own eyes.

This was the machine which would remain by her side for the rest of her life, and she knew that she had to become accustomed to its presence. It was a 'mind-link'; a man-made device which was able to both receive and transmit all of her brainwaves. The meshing of the human mind with such a mechanical device presented the linked person with an awesome new mental vocabulary. Not only did Carol now have a perfect mirror for her own thoughts but, through the machine she had the potential to be linked to all other such man-machine 'couples'.

"Carol!". The sudden cry coming from inside her mind startled her; the machine skidded sharply back until it came to an abrupt halt as it hit the wall behind it. The thump of the contact was like a physical blow which coursed through her mind into the rest of her body. The agony was unlike anything she had experienced before, engulfing her body and her mind in sheets of fire. The machine now sat immobile, temporarily incapacitated by the force of the impact.

As she slowly recovered, Carol forced herself to muster her inner resources, and she began to concentrate on making her mind and body relax. Gradually the pain subsided, and it was replaced by a new feeling of strength and deep calm. This time, she decided to make the initiative of the contact with the metallic device which was now a direct extension of

her consciousness. Thus she began, speaking without uttering any words: "I am sorry, Laroc, I didn't expect your voice to have such a strong effect on my senses. I am afraid that I reacted far too wildly to that single word from you."

"That is quite understandable, Carol", Laroc replied. It is very difficult to adjust to another presence within one's consciousness; we shouldn't expect to feel quite comfortable with one another for a while yet. Perhaps we should begin by clearing our mind and trying to focus on one particular line of thought. An appropriate subject might be one which is familiar to both of us - the nature of the mind-link and the reason for its creation."

"That would be a good idea, " Carol agreed, "as by concentrating on that which has brought us together, we can develop a solid basis for understanding and we can begin to tap the power which is now ours."

So Laroc continued, "We have both been preparing from the beginning of our existences for today. Up until a short time ago, humans were born, lived their lives, and then died as solitary units, totally separate from the other beings around them. It must have been a lonely experience - having to go about one's life from day to day, the only link with other people's consciousnesses being the awkward and stifling form of communication which is called speech. This had been the state of human existence from the beginning of time. But gradually a growing need for a more efficient means of communication was felt among the general population. Over many millenia, various preliminary and often unsuccessful attempts were made to widen the circle of consciousness. These culminated in the use of certain drugs such as LSD, cocaine, morphine, and many others. But the limited usefulness of such 'mind-expanding' substances soon became very evident, and thus it was decided that a more serious effort had to be undertaken. Large and ambitious research projects were therefore created, and some of the best minds in the world were engaged in this problem. For many decades the most concentrated search ever undertaken was continued. An impasse was reached, however, as theoretical barriers held back the large leaps in technology which were necessary for the project to be successful.

"Ironically, the solution to the problem came not as the result of one of these mega-projects, but as the brainchild of an electronics technician working independently in Western Europe. Experimenting with the interference of certain radio wavelengths with human thoughts, he stumbled upon one frequency which seemed to correspond exactly with that emitted by humans when they were engaged in deep thought. By setting up a device which could both receive and transmit these waves, he was able to create a machine which could interface perfectly with the human mind. Thus was created the type of machine of which I, Laroc, am one of the first prototypes. Not only am I able to mesh intimately with the particular human psyche to which I am paired, but through us, each human is able to interact with all others. Thus I, Laroc, am not an independent

mind with which you may only communicate on a one-to-one basis, but I am, in fact, a synthesis of all the other human minds which are linked to machines such as myself.

"As a result of our creation, all humans have truly jumped on to the same 'wavelength'. The world-wide community of minds which was once only the figment of the imaginations of dreamers is now becoming a reality. The power of the human mind has been multiplied a million fold, and it will surely change the world forever. One must not forget, however, that if all humans were endowed with this gift at birth, normal development to adulthood could not proceed. The slow process of the formation of a well-adjusted human being would be immediately and completely shattered by the influx of the thoughts of millions of others if a newborn were subjected to the mind-link. Thus individuals are not 'plugged in' until they reach twenty-five years of age. Before that time their lives are dedicated to, firstly, the acquisition of the knowledge of truth and morality and, secondly, to procreation, in order that each successive generation can be raised without the interference of the link. You, Carol, have just reached your twenty-fifth birthday and thus, today you have joined the rest of mankind. This is the first day of the rest of your life. May your new gift bring health and happiness to you and all those who touch you."

With a deep mental sigh, Carol withdrew slightly from her connection. She found it quite tiring to devote her mental energy to this new form of communication. She contemplated her new state of being, and all that it implicated. There was something else gnawing at her mind, however. She could already feel the insistent call of other minds beckoning her to come and join them. She knew that, very soon, she must succumb to their demands and admit them all. In doing so, she would effectively bare herself to the entire world. It was a terrifying idea and yet in its inevitability she drew some comfort. Few things in the world were now certain, aside from birth, death, taxes, and 'interfacing'.

With a few last moments of reflection of her life as it had been, and some contemplation of the changes which she would soon experience, Carol braced herself, and finally let them all in.

She sat by her window, staring out towards the cold dark waters of the North Sea. Winter was setting in, and cold winds lashed out against the waves and the shoreline. Very little life could be seen, as everything was now ready for the winter's onslaught. A solitary seagull winged its way north, heading quickly towards the shelter where its mate and offspring were gathered.

The interior of Carol's house reflected the iciness of the land around it - one could almost feel that all of the life had flown out of it. It had been a week since Carol, through Laroc, had become a part of the newly-formed

human community. A strange transformation had overtaken Carol during that time. She now sat very still in her rocking-chair, only occasionally moving enough to cause it to rock a fraction of an inch. Her fingers lay laxly upon the oak arm-rests, the skin having taken on a dull bluish-gray hue. Her figure had become gaunt, as evidenced by the way her clothes now hung loosely upon her once-ample figure. Slowly, a dark stain advanced across the carpet beneath her.

Carol had not stirred from her chair since having become a full member of the mind-link. But while her body had begun to decay, a fire was still burning deep within her. For her mind was engaged in a glorious symphony of communication. She was experiencing all that was the essence of human existence - the triumphs of progress, the despair of war, the emotions of love and hatred and greed and fear and hope. Her body was firmly rooted to the earth, but her mind was soaring, drinking deeply of the stream of human consciousness in which she now swam.